

# Risk Control Best Practices:

## Sewer Backups and Sanitary Sewer Overflows

Sewer systems can be affected by several factors, including weather, the buildup of fats, oils, and grease, improper disposal of materials, and design flaws. Public works departments can take steps to reduce the risks associated with sewer backups and sanitary sewer overflows (SSOs), which can lead to costly insurance claims and damage to a municipality's reputation.

The most effective way to prevent sewer backups is through a proactive maintenance program. Creating a maintenance program should focus on known problem areas and include regular efforts to keep the system clean and functioning properly. While backups can sometimes occur without fault on the part of the municipality, all municipalities have a responsibility to exercise reasonable care in maintaining their systems and preventing blockages.

Once a problem with a sewer system is identified, it is important to address it promptly and work toward a timely resolution.



## Take Preventive Measures

### Perform preventive maintenance (PM) and make regular capital improvements

- Use a work order system to help establish a routine preventative maintenance schedule.
- Work orders should include maintenance hole conditions, inspections and cleaning, line flushing, and tree root treatment.
- Use CCTV sewer inspection cameras to conduct proactive inspections.
- Remedy any issues found through inspections promptly.
- After inspection, replace lines and equipment that have exceeded their useful life or have been damaged over time.
- Prioritize known problem areas or locations for maintenance and capital improvements.
- Use a geographic information system (GIS) to map the system and use technology to identify trends and generate documentation when needed.

## Take control of Fat, Oils and Grease (FOG)

Regardless of who oversees grease trap regulations in your community, it is critical to be on the same page when blockages occur.

- Consider monitoring traps via an alarm that will indicate when service is needed.
- Document all communication with and warnings issued to grease trap owners. Enforce your grease trap ordinances.
- Inspect permitted grease traps regularly.
- Notify the health department or whoever oversees grease trap enforcement following a FOG-related backup.



## Responding to Sewer Back Ups

Isolate the problem safely, investigate the cause, communicate with residents or business owners and implement the corrective action.

- Create a response plan for all sewer backups and SSOs that includes safety training for all involved.
- Train staff on how and what to communicate to homeowners and business owners when discussing the backup with the resident. It is important not to admit fault prematurely; let the claims adjuster do their job based on the facts.
- Complete a report that details the location, events of the day, cause of the backup or SSO, and action taken. Be sure to always include photos of the scene and property that was damaged or could have been damaged.

## Educate the Public

Teach the public how to spot warning signs of a potential backup and what to do.

- Communicate with customers via social media and your website.
- Educate your customers and ask for their assistance in solving the problem. Provide an email or text number so that the public can notify your department of any issues quickly.
- In areas where you are seeing “flushable” wipes or other materials that cause blockages, go door-to-door to explain the problem and ask for compliance.
- Consider working with local schools to educate students about the sewer system and what can and can't be flushed safely.
- Test and use automated call systems that communicate what to do in the event of a backup.

## Report Claims Promptly

Your claims adjuster will advise you on what steps to take. Provide your adjuster with the investigation form and any photos you have taken.

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# Sewer Backup Investigation

Location/Address of Overflow: \_\_\_\_\_

On-site Response Personnel: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Investigation: \_\_\_\_\_

Property Owner Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of first notification of the back up? How were they notified?	
Date of action taken? Describe:	
Describe any damage to the property:	
Apparent cause of the backup:	
Was a camera used to investigate the cause of the back up? Describe:	
Estimated age of the sewer main:	
What type of construction is the sewer main?	
How often is this section of line inspected or serviced?	
What is the most recent date of inspection or cleaning at this location?	
Describe the last service taken at this location: (flushed, jetted, rodded, etc.)	
Was the cause of the back up in the main or lateral?	
Has there been a prior history of blockages in the main? When?	
Are there any businesses, schools, or restaurants nearby? How close?	
Was the municipality doing any work in the area prior to the backup? If so, what was being done?	

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